

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF MONASTIC
TOURISM IN TIBETAN AREAS

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ABSTRACT

Tibetan monastic tourism is discussed including prior leasehold experience in Tsang lha Township (Zhānglà 障腊), as well as recent efforts at Sku 'bum (Tǎ'ér Sì 塔尔寺) and Bla brang (Lābǔléngsì 拉卜楞) monasteries in the context of field work completed 2001 to 2007 in Zung chu rdzong (Sōngpān 松潘) and Gzi tsha sde dgu rdzong (Jíuzhàigōu 九寨沟) in Sichuān (四川) Province, Bla brang Monastery in Gānsù (甘肃) Province, and Sku 'bum Monastery in Qīnghǎi 青海 Province. Four points are addressed in considering the sustainability of Tibetan monastic tourism: the role of monasteries in tourism; monasteries and cultural interpretation, particularly tour guides' interpretations; protection of monasteries' historical relics; and a framework for sustainable monastic tourism.

KEY WORDS

Tibet, monastery, sustainable, tourism, Bla brang, Sku bum

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INTRODUCTION

With the opening of the Lhasa railway in 2005, concurrent improvement of roads in Tibetan areas, and following the notion that "If western China is going to develop, tourism should take the lead (Xībùdàkāifā, lǚyóuyàodāngxiān 西部大开发，旅游要当先)" the pressure and influence of tourism on religious and monastic traditions have become serious concerns. Current government policy encourages monasteries to be self-sufficient therefore, research on how to develop monastic tourism in Tibetan areas and how to unite traditional and modern concerns in Tibetan areas is urgently needed. Based on fieldwork in A mdo,² I propose four essential factors to consider to better understand the sustainable development of monastic tourism:

- the role of monasteries in tourism;
- monasteries and cultural interpretation, particularly tour guides' interpretations;
- protection of monasteries' historical relics; and
- a framework for sustainable monastic tourism.

BACKGROUND HISTORY

Religious practices at monasteries and temples in Tibetan areas have suffered as a result of modernization, including tourism. Conflicts in the late 1990s at monastic sites along the popular Gzi tsha sde dgu and Gser mtsho tourist route in Sìchuān Province led me to consider the possibilities for

² A mdo includes Tibetan areas of Qīnghái, Gānsù, and Sìchuān provinces.

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harmonious coexistence of traditional Tibetan Buddhist culture and such recent phenomena as monastic tourism. In particular, problems have arisen due to tensions between the 'leasehold' form of monastic tourism and traditional monastery operations. My observation of various monasteries in the region suggests that sustainability and autonomy are essential for a successful mixing of modern and traditional concerns. The foundation of this model is the proper management of both the monastery and tourism; proper management is best done by the monastery itself.

Local people's history and traditions should be respected and protected. During the development of monastic tourism, the monasteries should be responsible for the interpretation of sites and the selection of tour guides. Additionally, when constructing and repairing monasteries for the development of tourism, attention should be given to protecting cultural relics inside and outside the monasteries to preserve the historicity of sites while meeting the demands of modern tourism. Respecting the reality of local culture ensures the sustainable development of tourism. It is essential to consider how we can accommodate both traditional and modern culture and likewise how Chinese and Tibetan culture can coexist.

My fieldwork was done in 'dzam thang (Ràngtáng 让唐) County and Tsang lha Township, Zung chu County (Sōngpān) in Rnga ba (Ābà 阿坝) Tibetan and Qiāng 羌 Autonomous Prefecture, and at Sku 'bum Monastery in Xīníng 西宁 City in Mtsho sngon beginning in 2001. What follows are recommendations for the sustainable development of monastic tourism.

THE POSITION OF MONASTERIES IN TOURISM

It is important to determine the relationship between monasteries and tourism. A monastery is not a factory, a shop, or a hotel anyone can operate; it is primarily a place for the expression of religious feelings and performance of religious actions and is a vital part of Tibetan culture. Monasteries should not be leased to businessmen. Responsibility for management of tourism and tourist services should be taken by the monastery.

From the time monastic tourism began in 1989 in China to 2002,³ there were several conflicts over the leasehold model in Zung chu County. In the context of the rapid development of the tourist economy in 1998, Dga' mas (Gāmī 呷米) Monastery monks decided to develop monastic tourism, hoping to be self-sufficient by increasing monastery income, however, these efforts proved unsuccessful due to lack of experience and inability to attract many tourists to the monastery.

Businessmen from Lèshān 乐山⁴ signed a contract with the monastery in 1999 with the purported aim of financially supporting the monastery which, in turn, allocated certain rights to the businessmen. This brought the monastery directly into the tourism industry and resulted in a new phenomenon in monastic tourism: the leasehold system. After Dga' mas was leased in 1999, Sna sten Monastery (Yuánbàsi 元坝寺), Gtso tsang Monastery (Chuānzhǔsì 川主寺), and Spyang gtsang Monastery (Shānbāsì 山巴寺) were leased to Lèshān businessmen. The leasehold contracts varied among monasteries, according to certain monks.

³ Báimǎcuò 2004.

⁴ In southwest Sìchuān at the confluence of the Sung chu (Mínjiāng 岷江), Rgya mo rngul chu (Dàdùhé 大渡河), and Qīngyījiāng 青衣江.

The leasehold system adopted in Tsang lha Township, Zung chu County created much conflict between monasteries and society, monastic and lay communities, local tradition and modernization, tourists and local villagers, and between vendors of religious items and their potential customers. The conflict between traditional and modern attitudes fractured the traditional concept of a monastery, which has two levels of meaning.

The first layer refers to traditional concepts of the monastery as an economic unit. In the past, the monastery's basic source of financial support came from local offerings and earnings its lamas (*bla ma*) and monks generated from performing religious rites. After the institution of the leasehold system, the lessees paid lease and maintenance fees, and even salaries for some monks, causing a rupture in the traditional monastic economic system with the monastery assuming the role of a business, undermining the faith of believers. Commercialization reduced the religious value of the leased monasteries in the eyes of locals, thus motivating religious practitioners to concentrate their focus on such monasteries without the leasehold system as Sna zhig dgon pa (Duihési 对河寺) and Rin spungs dgon pa (Línbōsì 林波寺).

A second layer of meaning refers to the relationship between the monastery and its affiliated villages, the *lha sde* 'religious community'. For example, Spyang gtsang Monastery was traditionally supported by the *lha sde* surrounding it: the natural villages of Spyang gtsang (Shānbā 山巴), A stong pa (Lādōngbà 拉冬坝), Ma yus (Má yī 麻依), Chu che ge (Qǔqígē 曲其哥), and Gser lung kha (Shělongkǎ 舍隆卡). After the initiation of the leasehold system and the beginning of monastic tourism, the monastery became a market space. This affected its religious nature, and resulted in local villagers transferring offerings and religious practice to other monasteries. Local believers, monks, and head lamas at the two Bon monasteries (Snang zhig and Rin spungs)

refused to engage in the leasehold system. Consequently, they attracted offerings and religious devotion of many local believers. Most *lha sde* members attached to Spyang gtsang, Dga' mas, and Sna sten monasteries transferred their religious affiliation and religious practices to these two monasteries. Thus, even though Snang zhig Monastery did not engage in the leasehold system during the years under consideration, it became self-sufficient because of increased local support. Believers from outside Zung chu County, including many from such herding areas as Mdzod dge (Ruòěrgài 若尔盖) also became supporters. According to a monk at Snang zhig Monastery, the monastery received offerings totaling 180,000 RMB between May 2001 and May 2002—less than in 2000—suggesting that the introduction of the leasehold system damaged locals' perception of this monastery and decreased its patronage. The traditional concept of the *lha sde* was also harmed, leading devotees to concentrate their focus on Snang zhig and Rin spungs monasteries.

The economic structure of the monasteries changed, rupturing the traditional economy and leading local villagers to redefine their relationship with the monasteries. These changing relationships did not necessarily leave the leaseholding monasteries without money, however. For example, Spyang gtsang Monastery earned 100,000 RMB in 2001 from the leasehold contract.

Conflict developed between the commodity economy and local traditional culture. Historically, Zung chu was an important point on the eastern tea and horse trade route, and the Tibetan district around Zhang la was an essential part of this route. Local villagers thus have a long tradition of commodity consciousness, and comparatively strong abilities in business; the many shops, hotels, and other enterprises that local people currently run in Gtso tsang dgon Town attest to this. However, though local people have a strong commodity consciousness, prior to the 1990s this was a

traditional commodity consciousness based on goods barter and a small-scale cash economy; locals did not perceive culture and beliefs as commodities that could be monetized.

Without a clear sense of what a cultural commodity was, monasteries were leased and what had been a ritual space became a market space. Business talk infiltrated sacred spaces, and the ritual halls, previously entered only by believers, became places for curious observers to stroll about. When the profit orientation of the leasing businessmen was added, locals became disillusioned with the monasteries, and frequently pointed at and cursed the guides and tourists, causing conflicts. For example, a two to three meter-long stick of incense that sold for twenty RMB at the Guānyīn 观音 Temple in Xīnjīn 新津 near Chéngdū 成都 was sold for 130 RMB by leesees of the Zung chu monasteries. Local villagers criticized this, saying, "The incense at the monasteries is now more expensive than opium!"

Economic conflicts between the monasteries and the leasing agents grew. Because these monasteries were along the popular Gzi tsha sde dgu and Gser mtsho tourist route, tourists steadily increased in number. Believers and non-believers alike started entering sacred spaces, and both groups put money in the monasteries' donation boxes. As a result, along with the sale of incense and religious souvenirs, the donation boxes became a central source of revenue. In the monasteries on the tourist route in Zung chu, the monthly income from these boxes was close to 10,000 RMB during peak tourist season.

According to a Gtso tshang Monastery monk, the income from the donation boxes between May first and mid June 2002 totaled 30,000 RMB. Recipients of this income became a central concern for the leasing agents, monasteries, and public at several monasteries. Three different arrangements emerged. At Sna sten Monastery and Dga' mas monasteries, the offerings were given to the leasing agents. At Spyang gtsang Monastery, the contents of the container

within the main temple went to the leasing agent, but the contents of the box at the door went to the monastery. At Gtso tshang Monastery, the contents of all donation boxes went to the monastery. Because of this situation, the leasing agent for these monasteries spent the whole year 'developing tourism' at Sna sten and Dga' mas Monasteries; they did not pursue business activities at Gtso tshang Monastery in 2000. According to the monks and local people, one reason Gtso tshang Monastery was allowed to reopen to tourism while the other monasteries closed is because the contents of donation boxes belonged to the monastery.

Regardless of monastic tourism in Zung chu, the issue of control over donation boxes is crucial. There were many conflicts in Zung chu before 2002, mostly because the monasteries did not seek more direct management and control of financial resources, such as the donation boxes.

I attended a meeting in Xīníng in May 2007 and heard that Sku 'bum Monastery had been leased to a businessman. Further fieldwork revealed that Sku 'bum was using the same ticketing system as previously. However, the price had increased from thirty to eighty RMB. There were also other differences: some villagers did odd jobs, such as cleaning offering lamps and other tasks related to the butter lamp offerings, as well as tending the Great Stupa Temple, Sku 'bum mthong grol mchod rten chen mo (Dàjīnwádiàn 大金瓦殿) in the evening. These villagers lived in the temples where they worked. Some older monks also performed similar work. Each month, the monastery management committee paid a village leader who divided the money between the workers; this arrangement was usually laid out in an annually renewed contract. The temple manager and the village leader together collected and handed over temple donations to the monastery management committee.

With increasing numbers of tourists, the monastery had to be vigilant in guarding valuable objects within the temple therefore, some monks also worked to oversee the

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temples. For this, a yearly contract was arranged between a monk and the monastery management committee. The monk was expected to be someone who had resided at Sku 'bum for several years. In addition to the contract, the new caretaker monk, the old caretaker, and members of the monastery management committee inventoried items in the temple. These temple caretakers were also paid each month from temple donations.

INTERPRETING MONASTIC CULTURE

To maintain the authenticity of explanations about monastic culture given to tourists, it is essential that monks determine, develop, and interpret monastic culture for tourists. These important factors present challenges, including the need for monks to master Chinese and English.

The cultural interpretation of each monastery should follow the authentic features of the monastic tradition and needs to be composed and approved by each monastery's monks. In July 2007, Jo bo Lha khang Monastery in Lhasa delivered a report entitled *The Measurement of Tourism* (*Lǚ yóu cuòshī* 旅游措施) to the Cultural Management Office (Wénguǎnjú 文管局) of Lhasa City. It reported more guides were needed for the increasing numbers of tourists, however, within the contemporary situation, many tour guides' historical explanations were incorrect and their level of cultural knowledge minimal. Tourists as well as pilgrims left dissatisfied. In light of this, it is hoped that the Cultural Management Office will rectify these problems, in part by appropriate training and support to prepare knowledgeable Tibetan guides.

Guides are among the most important stakeholders involved in implementation and development of sustainable monastic tourism. The development and implementation of

standards for professional guides must be done collaboratively.

Local participation is important in organizing and guiding tourist activities because it contributes to preservation of local culture, improves the accuracy of guides' interpretations, and contributes to the economic development of the local population. For Tibetan monastic tourism, local participation should be reflected in the tour organizers and guides, who ensure that monastic culture proceeds in an authentic, sustainable manner. Many Tibetan monks cannot speak Modern Standard Chinese and many local youths lack sufficient knowledge of Tibetan religions to act as guides. This explains to some extent why most guides within monasteries on the Tibetan tourism circuit are non-Tibetans from Inner China. After years of field work I strongly feel that the language limitations of monks and the limited knowledge of Tibetan religions among Tibetan youths who could otherwise act as guides, seriously impacts the local autonomy of Tibetan monastic tourism. The lack of these skills causes locals to remain passive in monastic tourism.

In the earliest leasehold form of monastic tourism, the lessee was responsible for organizing tour guide services at the monasteries. Tour groups were to be divided into male and female groups, and separately introduced to the situation at the monastery. However, appointed tour guides did not accurately understand local religion and traditions and often made false and misleading statements. They entered and exited religious buildings at will, ignoring appropriate rules and customs; some wore hats inside temples, pointed at religious images with their index fingers; and guides (including female guides) slept overnight in the main hall. Such behavior violates the monks' religious vows and Tibetan customs, and resulted in a backlash from locals.

Tibetans generally remove their hats in respect to religious images when they enter a temple and use an

upturned hand to indicate images and sacred items. There are also restrictions against laypeople staying in the main hall of a monastery at night, especially laywomen. As a result, both lessor and lessee agreed that guides could not enter monastic buildings to provide introductions to tourists, and female tour guides could not be within the monastery compound after nine p.m.

When I visited Dga' mas Monastery in June 2002, there was a new building to the right of the monastery meant to house tour guides and those associated with the lessee. Nevertheless, locals' criticism continues.

Many tour guides from inner China lack basic knowledge of Tibetan religions and cannot adequately introduce the monasteries and explain Tibetan folk traditions. Ignorant, untrained tour guides mislead tourists and disseminate a distorted image of Tibetan culture. Some make disrespectful and improper comments regarding holy lakes, monasteries, and sacred mountains and distort Tibetan history and culture.

Many Hàn 汉 visitors lack knowledge of and respect for Tibetan traditions and local culture. In addition, tour guides may mislead them. In this context, it is hardly surprising that tourists misbehave: they beat drums, sit on Dharma seats (*chos khri*),⁵ touch fragile sacred items, and swim and bathe in sacred lakes, creating conflict between visitors and villagers that impacts community stability. These conflicts are noticed by local governments and monasteries, increasing the awareness of the importance of encouraging the monasteries' own explanations and interpretations of their historical relics and, at the same time, emphasizing the need for sustainable tourism.

At present, Dga' mas and Spyang gtsang monasteries in Zung chu have begun appointing monks as tour guides

⁵ The seat is only for a high Lama when he teaches and oversees rituals.

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and using explanations prepared by the monasteries. These guides are required to pass an examination in Chinese, which is a challenge for most. The explanations given by monks who do know Chinese are based on explanatory pamphlets the monastery edited.

The disorder created by the number of tourist guides was the most significant tourism problem in 2007, according to the director of the Sku 'bum Monastery Management Committee (Siyuàn guǎnlǐ wěiyuánhui 寺院管理委员会). In 2007, there were eighteen tourist companies in operation with a total of 300 guides. Management was decidedly more lax than prior to 2003. Before, guides were required to pass the professional tourist guide exam and demonstrate their knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism. Guides were generally required to wear traditional Tibetan dress and wear their official guide badges, or else they were not allowed to enter the monastery compound. However, guides did not wear Tibetan clothing in 2007, and different guides gave varying interpretations based on their individual understandings.

Since early 2006, an increasing number of monasteries and local governments in such places as Dga' mas and Spyang gtsang in A mdo and the Jo khang Temple in Lhasa have begun focusing on the importance of how Tibetan culture and religion are interpreted. Likewise, in May 2006 a seminar focusing on tourism development of Jo snang Monastery in 'dzam thang was held. The local government invited Jo snang Monastery high lamas and, remarkably, a guide to attend. This illustrates a recognition of the importance of giving certain authority to the monasteries themselves.

THE PROTECTION OF CULTURAL OBJECTS

Monasteries are an important part of Tibetan material culture, and as such their continued function is crucial to the

sustainability of Tibetan culture as a whole. Simultaneously, given the rapid changes brought on by modernity, the museum function of monasteries has become increasingly important, stressing the need for greater awareness of the need to protect monasteries while developing tourism. I will discuss this by addressing protection of historical objects inside the monastery and the problem of protecting historical objects outside the monastery.

Many Tibetan monasteries have long histories and preserve numerous relics. In order to meet pilgrims' needs and tourists' curiosity, these objects are often displayed and are measured, certified, registered, and secured. Sku 'bum Monastery has done very well in this regard. Early each year the incumbent managers of each of the monastery's temples (*dgon gnyer*) hand over to the newly elected managers the Buddhist images, *thang ka*, and other objects. This process is overseen by the Monastery Management Committee, which certifies, measures, and photographs the objects. It is important that the Monastery Management Committee of Tibetan monasteries measure and register their old statues, *thang ka*, and other ritual instruments to protect against loss, theft, and damage that may occur in a tourist environment. For example, when I visited Jo snang Monastery in 'dzam thang County the monastery had many historical objects on display with little in the way of security.

Brag ri (Hòusì 后寺) Monastery in Zung chu County reported the loss of a statue in 2004. The monastery had not measured and registered the statue, hampering recovery on the part of villagers and public security.

Another essential component of material culture is the monasteries' exterior objects. The first aspect of this is protecting the actual buildings. In the hope that tourism will flourish, certain monasteries destroyed historical remnants and selected new sites for rebuilding. For example, when monks, nuns, lay people, or government officers rebuild a monastery they may demolish the historical remnants of the

old monastery and build a new one; or they may abandon the old site altogether and move to a new site, literally moving away from the memory of history, cutting off the past.

Many years ago, a monastery at the foot of Mt. Sku lha (Sigūniáng 四姑娘) in Jīnchuān 金川 County was demolished and rebuilt at a new, more convenient, beautiful site. The monastery had a photograph of the old site, which I suggested be hung on the wall of the new monastery to honor their long history. Similar events have taken place at such tourist centers as Xiānggélīlā 香格里拉 County, Bde chen (Díqīng 迪庆) Prefecture, Yúnnān 云南 Province.

At present, the Jo khang Temple in Lhasa confronts the same problem. One of the oldest temples in Tibet, it has limited interior space to accommodate the 5,000 people who visit daily. The Cultural Management Office of Lhasa City and the monastery are considering various measures to protect the temple, such as controlling tourist numbers and directing visitors to other monasteries.

A second issue pertains to protecting objects outside the monastery. Thorough preservation of the entirety of Tibetan tangible heritage would necessitate the cataloguing of countless items from numerous historical sites. There are many stupas (*mchod rten*), sacred caves, groves, and lakes that should be protected for the development of monastic tourism. For example, the monastery of Bang to in 'dzam thang County has a pile of *ma Ni* stones dating from the Yuán 元 Dynasty (1271-1368) and several earthen stupa: the Byams sems mchod rten, the Sgrol ma mchod rten, and 'dul dul mchod rten, all of which are 200-500 years old and in need of protection.

ESTABLISHING A FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE MONASTIC TOURISM

Cultural tourism began developing in China in the 1980s. Prominent cultural tourism areas include the North-Central China Plain, the Uyghur cultural area, and the Southwest ethnic minority areas. These areas' experiences provide monastic tourism in Amdo and the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) with points for reflection and consideration. I examine tourism in Amdo and the TAR in an attempt to find a sustainable model for Tibetan monastic tourism and to balance tradition with contemporary developments. Based on several years of field work, I have determined that the Bla brang model (described later) has the most potential as a model for sustainable Tibetan monastic tourism. It is well-structured, self-supporting, and sustainable compared to tourism in Zung chu County and Sku 'bum. This model should be improved and extended to other Tibetan areas.

In response to the reaction of tourists and locals, the Rnga ba Prefecture Religious Affairs Commission (Ābà zhōu zōngjiàojú 阿坝州宗教局) issued a report to the Prefecture People's Government (Ābà zhōu rén mín zhèng fǔ 阿坝州人民政府) in May 2002. Based on investigations into the situation surrounding monastic tourism in Zung chu County, it was entitled *Some Opinions Regarding the Standardization of Religious Monasteries' Participation and Engagement in Business Activities* (Guānyú zhěngdùng guīfàn zōngjiào sìmiào cānyù cóngshì jīngyíng huódòng de yìjiàn 关于整顿规范宗教寺庙参与从事经营活动的意见). These recommendations were approved by the Prefecture People's Government and were promulgated to relevant organizations at the county and prefecture levels for implementation as Document N^o. 64.⁶ This document was sent to each county

⁶ 2002. *A Circular on Controlling and Rectifying Some Existing Problems in the Tourism Markets* (Guānyú xiànzhì

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government along tourist routes, instituting a process of rectifying problems related to monastic tourism in certain Zung chu monasteries. It prohibited leaseholders from participating in the administration of tourism-related commercial activities and banned leasing monastic property to outsiders. Moreover, the monasteries' management committees were ordered to immediately dissolve leaseholds. Afterwards, the Sìchuān Provincial Government carried out a comprehensive investigation of the regulation of the tourism industry in the entire province and issued a related directive⁷ to the Rnga ba Prefecture Government in October 2002. Problems related to economic activities in certain monasteries along Zung chu's tourist routes were specifically mentioned. Rnga ba Prefecture was required to address such problems as leasing of monasteries and improper tourism-related economic activities within a month.

In November 2002, the Rnga ba Prefecture Government sent *A Circular on Controlling and Rectifying Existing Problems in the Tourism Markets* to each of the county governments along the tourist routes initiating a second wave of problem rectification related to monastic tourism in certain Zung chu monasteries. The Zung chu County Nationalities Religious Affairs Bureau (Sōngpānxiàn mínzōngjú 松潘县民宗局) ordered the monastery management committees to immediately dissolve their agreements pertaining to monastery-based economic activities in conjunction with investment networks. The Bureau declared that leaseholders would be henceforth prohibited from participating in economic activities related

zhénggǎi lǚyóu shìchǎng wèntí dé tōngzhī 关于限制整改旅游市场问题的通知).

⁷ *A Circular on Some Problems Related to the Control and Rectification of the Tourism Markets* (Guānyú xiànzhi zhěnggǎi lǚyóu shìchǎng wèntí de tōngzhī 关于限制整改旅游市场问题的通知).

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to the development of monastery tourism. Furthermore, in accordance with the spirit of Document N^o. 123,⁸ the pricing system for entrance tickets to monasteries and prices for the sale of religious items was brought under strict regulation.

One year after the issuance of the documents above, the monasteries applied to the government for the right to conduct tourist-related activities autonomously. The government agreed on the pricing system⁹ for entrance tickets to the monasteries in May 2004. This pricing system remained in effect at the time of publication. The County Religious Affairs Bureau strictly implements new regulations of religious routines from a national government circular issued March 2005¹⁰ prohibiting businessmen and non-monks from participating in religious tourism. Tourist guides are monks who must pass a Chinese language proficiency test and are called 'narrators' (*jiǎngjiěyuán* 讲解员). There are fifteen narrators at Dga' mas Monastery and ten at Spyang gtsang Monastery. They deducted five to eight percent from the sum of tourist group revenue as personal payment in 2005. The monasteries had higher profits under the new ticket pricing system than under the leasehold model. Dga' mas Monastery received about 46,000 RMB and Spyang gtsang Monastery received 140,000 RMB from ticket sales, public offering containers, and sales of such religious items as *thang ka*, *rdo rje*, and so on in 2005. The monastic community arranged tourist work attendants and held daily rituals. Conflicts such as those discussed above are absent in this form of monastic tourism and villagers

⁸ 2002. *A Circular on Controlling and Rectifying Existing Problems in the Tourism Markets* (*Guānyú xiànzhi zhěnggǎi lǚyóu shìchǎng wèntí de tōngzhī* 关于限制整改旅游市场问题的通知).

⁹ Admission ticket system.

¹⁰ *Religious Affairs Regulations* (*Zōngjiào shìwù tiáoliè* 宗教事务条例).

returned to the monastery to worship, circumambulate, and perform various rituals.

Monastery management committees have reinforced this self-supporting form of monastic tourism for four years, however, the following problems are still obvious:

- the narrators speak Modern Standard Chinese poorly,
- some monasteries have not been registered as tourist sites by the Sìchuān Provincial Government, consequently, tourist buses often will not stop at such monasteries unless monks in these monasteries pay the guides and drivers and give them local products to entice them to stop, and
- monastery management has been adversely affected by villagers' business activities.

In recent years, villagers have entered Dga' mas Monastery to do business with tourists without paying fees to the monastery. Disorder has followed. Raucous villagers hawked jewelry and other goods as if the monastery were a market place, negatively impacting the monks' sales of such items as *thang ka* and *rdo rje* and detracting from a solemn religious atmosphere. The monks succeeded in having the government stop monastic tourism in July 2006 in order to deal with such temporary problems.

Dga' mas Monastery and other monasteries have faced additional problems. Following the termination of the leasehold model in 2002, outside businessmen began building 'cultural'/ 'custom' villages in 2003-2004. 'The First Village (along the route to) Huánglóng and Jiǔzhàigōu (Jiǔháung dìyīcūn 九—黄第一村) opened next to Dga' mas Monastery in May 2005. However, after one year, the government asked the proprietors to close it because a non-

religious place was holding religious activities and selling related items.

Many accounts about the custom village of Jiu-háung dì yī cūn circulate among locals. Some say the 'inhabitants' gave 'medicine' to tourists that impaired their judgment in order to encourage them to buy expensive *thang ka* and Buddhist images. Though I have not confirmed such accounts, unethical practices were conspicuous. According to a County Religious Affairs Bureau official, a white stupa and '*khor lo* 'pilgrimage circuit' were built when construction of First Village began. Shortly thereafter, the government ordered First Village to dismantle the stupa and '*khor lo* due to locals reactions. What remains in place of the stupa is an odd sculpture of a bird-like being with a yak's head. Unusual murals depicting Tibetans picking peaches and engaging in activities never before seen on the Tibetan Plateau have replaced the '*khor lo*.

Tibetan homes and *chos khang* 'shrine rooms' were also made in the custom village (tourist village) of Jiu-háung diyīcūn, and tour guides led tourists to meet a 'lama' who supposedly had just returned from a long retreat for divination and *byin rlabs* 'blessings'. This was short-lived. A tourist from Jiāngsū 江苏 Province wrote to the Provincial Tourist Bureau in August 2005 complaining about the fraud. In response, the provincial government dispatched a worker to secretly visit, who found that the 'lama' was an imposter (the undercover worker feigned forgetting his bag in the house of the monk, and saw the monk dressed in a Western-style suit when he later returned). The provincial government passed this information to the local government and the custom village was closed in September 2005. As of 2007, its ownership remained contested.

There was also conflict between the custom village and monastery. When the custom village was built, local businessmen hoped that the monastery would close its front gate so that tourists would pass the village and enter the

monastery by means of the First Village, however, the monastery disagreed. There was a wall separating the monastery from the village and the two competed for tourists.

The County Religious Affairs Bureau received a letter of complaint from a tourist in May 2005 accusing Dga'mas Monastery of cheating tourists. The office replied that if the accusation was true they would compensate him five times the price he originally paid. When the office asked him to help them investigate, the tourist did not appear nor reveal his address. An officer went to the monastery to investigate but could not identify any illegal activity. The government concluded that the custom village had framed the monastery in order to benefit itself, and ignored the complaint.

The pattern exhibited by such custom villages has been pursued and run by Tibetans themselves, though in somewhat different ways. For instance, such tourist enterprises as 'New Nomad Villages' (Mùmín xīncūn 牧民新村) and 'Happy Tibetan Families' (Zàngjiālè 藏家乐) have been created based on such tourist sites as 'Happy Farmer Families' (Nóngjiālè 农家乐), common throughout China. These are established by and in pre-existing Tibetan communities. Today, along the main tourist route to Jiuzhàigōu and Huānglǒng, 'New Nomad Villages' are often organized by several families with one family's house designated to serve as the tourist house. These villages offer Tibetan cultural performances to visitors.

My initial impression is that such performances present a theatrical and idealized representation of Tibetan culture that does not approach actual Tibetan culture or representation of complex Tibetan lifestyles. During my survey of the area in May 2007, I observed that these villagers performed dances and music for tourists and that the tourists enjoyed what they saw. The entertainment lasted for about three hours for each group of tourists who entered the Tibetan house escorted by the tour guide, who then introduced customs and traditions. Afterward, tourists

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entered the living room and listened to folk music and enjoyed Tibetan food. Although the quality of this sort of 'educational entertainment' varies depending on the education and experience of the villagers, the participating community no doubt benefits economically.

A POTENTIAL FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE MONASTIC TOURISM–THE BLA BRANG MODEL

In order to develop sustainable monastic tourism on the Tibetan Plateau, a sustainable model is essential. In the present context of monastic tourism, many aspects of the Bla brang Model could be emulated due to its effective, independent system.

Sku 'bum and Bla brang are arguably the two most famous monasteries in A mdo. Sku 'bum Monastery, one of the six great Dge lugs Monasteries,¹¹ is located at the site of Tsong kha pa's¹² birthplace in Qīnghǎi Province where tourism began growing in the mid 1980s. The Sku 'bum model differs from the Bla brang Model. The former requires the visitor to buy a single ticket from which monks take sections at each site. Local Monguor (Tüzú 土族) and lay Tibetans serve as guides rather than monks. Each tourist group pays fifty RMB to hire a guide. According to one guide, daily income from ticket sales reaches 30,000-40,000 RMB on certain days and belongs to the monastery. Guides gave their daily earnings to the agency manager, who

¹¹ The six great Dge lugs monasteries are Dga' ldan, 'bras spungs, Se ra, Bkra shis lhun po, Sku 'bum, and Bla brang.

¹² Tsong kha pa (1357-1419), an important philosopher and theoretician in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, founded the Dge lugs school of Tibetan Buddhism.

returned thirty percent (fifteen RMB per group) to the guide. The remainder went to the agency.

Originally the only tourist agency at Sku 'bum was the state-run agency affiliated with the postal service. Later, numerous private tourist agencies became involved. In 2001, guide services were standardized, necessitating guides to pass a professional tourist guide qualification exam and demonstrate knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism. Guides were generally required to wear traditional Tibetan dress and official guide badges, otherwise they could not enter the monastery compound. However, things had changed by 2007 when I visited the monastery. As mentioned above, many guides did not wear Tibetan clothing and explained the sites in divergent ways. It was clear that the monastery improperly managed the guides and their interpretations—the monastery should tell its own history and also train guides. There were 300 guides at Sku 'bum in 2007 who had not studied Tibetan Buddhism. The director of the monastery's management team told me in 2007, "The biggest problem is confusion among the guides."

Bla brang Monastery provides a very different form of monastic tourism. It opened to tourism in 1982 and has since become an exemplary model of cultural tourism among Tibetan Buddhist monasteries. Monastic tourism at Bla brang is primarily managed by the Cultural Relics Management Committee (Wénguǎnhuì 文管会), a sub-branch of the monastery management committee. Before noon and at night each day throughout the year, monks chant scriptures while local lay people visit the monastery's temples to circumambulate, make offerings, and perform other religious activities. Tourists may enter the temples in the afternoon.

The Cultural Relics Management Committee consists of a director and two vice directors, as well as several additional committee members. The Reception Division (Jiēdàizhàn 接待站) is a sub-division of the Cultural Relics

Management Committee and its director is a member of the Cultural Relics Management Committee.

The Reception Division had thirteen monks working as 'tour guides' in 2002, who called themselves *lo tswa ba* 'translators', a word that traditionally suggests scholar monks who translate Sanskrit texts into Tibetan. Two other guides were known as *lam khrid mkhan* 'knowers of the way', who only led tourists along the tour path. Of the thirteen translators, two were English-speaking guides. Monks in the Reception Division worked on a rotation system. In general, each guide led at least three groups per day through the monastery complex, giving explanations along the way.

During the peak tourist season, each guide might have taken as many as five groups a day. Monks in the Reception Division were admitted through a competitive examination and usually served a term of five years after which they could be admitted to higher level Buddhist study without taking the required examinations. During the peak tourist season, guides in the Reception Division were paid a salary of one hundred RMB per month. Tour groups did not pay the guides additional fees. According to monastery regulations, all tour groups were given a guided tour by a monastery-appointed monk after buying their tickets; guides from commercial agencies were not allowed to interpret monastic culture. Bla brang tourism income is managed by the monastery management committee and is typically used for monastery upkeep and repair, religious activities, and general expenses.

I recommend that monk-guides improve their interpretations by giving more detailed information, not simply announcing temple names accompanied by brief introductions. Additionally, photography and flashlights should not be completely forbidden.

It should be noted that the Bla brang Model is not perfect. The Cultural Relics Management Committee should make additional improvements to:

- improve managerial proficiency and methods,
- reinforce the quality of services,
- explicitly designate the number of tourist sites and the period they are open for tourism,
- specify the content of interpretative materials for each site, and
- set rules of conduct for monk-guides.

In addition to these improvements, the Cultural Relics Management Committee could improve the physical environment by:

- reinforcing the financial capacity and sales inventory of tourist outlets,
- accenting the monastic character of the monastery shop and setting reasonable and fair prices, and
- working to protect the monastery's historical objects and exhibit them appropriately.

Finally, monastery general management could be improved by:

- differentiating pilgrims from tours to more strictly separate the two and avoid the negative impact of monastic tourism on the religious functions of the monastery and
- setting and enforcing rules for tourists and pilgrims during rituals and chanting.

Bla brang and other monasteries can overcome these problems over time. For this to be done, however, it is crucial that the development of the monastery comes from within rather than depending on tourist agencies or leaseholders.

Two points are evident from the Bla brang model. First, for the last two decades, having developed a sustainable and autonomous style of monastic tourism, the Bla brang model has improved the local economy and simultaneously preserved the faith of devotees, clearly illustrating the model's effectiveness. Second, the Bla brang model demonstrates that it is possible for a monastery to professionally and systematically manage tourism in a way that reflects the interests of the monastery and respects Tibetan culture and history.

CONCLUSION

Monastic tourism on the Tibetan Plateau is booming, but faces many challenges, including the Chinese and English language abilities of monk-guides, the capacity of monasteries to manage all tourism-related activities, and the preservation and care of artifacts. Bla brang Monastery provides a potential framework for sustainable monastic tourism.

The development of monastic tourism is intricately connected to the development of Tibetan society. Future research is needed to clarify answers to questions regarding the capacity of management, the harmonious coordination of monastic tourism, pilgrimages, rituals, and monks' daily practice. Founding an equitable and sustainable development of monastic tourism should play a significant role in the future development of Tibetan culture, and in the construction of a cohesive society.

NON-ENGLISH TERMS

A

Ābà 阿坝

Ābà zhōu zōngjiàojú 阿坝州宗教局

Ābà zhōu rén mín zhèng fǔ 阿坝州人民政府

A mdo ཨ་མདོ།

A stong pa ཨ་སྟོང་པ།

B

Bde chen བདེ་ཆེན།

Bla brang ལྷ་བྲང་།

bla ma ལྷ་མ།

Bon བོན།

Brag ri བྲག་རི།

Byams sems mchod rten བྱམས་སེམས་མཆོད་རྟེན།

byin rlabs བྱིན་ལྷབས།

C

Chéngdū 成都

chos khang ཆོས་ཁང་།

chos khri ཆོས་ཁྲི།

Chuānzhǔsì 川主寺

Chu che ge ལྷ་ཆེ་གེ།

D

'dzam thang འཛམ་ཐང་།

Dàdùhé 大渡河

Dà jīnwǎ diàn 大金瓦殿

Déqìng 德庆

Dga' mas དག་འ་མས།

dgon gnyer དགོན་གཉེས།

Duihésì 对河寺

'dul dul mchod rten འདུལ་དུལ་མཆོད་རྟེན།

G

Gǎmǐ 呷米

Gānsù 甘肃

Dge lugs དགེ་ལུགས།

Gser mtsho གསེར་མཚོ།

Gser lung kha གསེར་ལུང་ཀ།

Gtso tsang གཙུང་ཙང་།

Guānyīn 观音

Gzi tsha sde dgu rdzong གཙུ་མཚེ་སྡེ་རྫོང་།

Guānyú zhéngdùn guífàn zōngjiào simiào cānyù cóngshì
jīngyíng huódòng de yìjiàn 关于整顿规范宗教寺庙参
与从事经营活动的意见

Guānyú xiànzhi zhěnggǎi lǚyóu shìchǎng wèntí de tōngzhī 关
于限制整改旅游市场问题的通知

H

Hòusì 后寺

Huánglóng 黄龙

J

Jiāngsū 江苏

jiǎngjiěyuán 讲解员

Jiēdàizhàn 接待站

Jīnchuān 金川

Jiǔ-háung dìyīcūn 九-黄第一村

Jiǔzhàigōu 九寨沟

Jo snang ཇོ་སང་།

Jo khang ཇོ་ཁང་།

Jo bo lha khang ཇོ་བོ་ལྷ་ཁང་།

K

'khor lo འཁོར་ལོ།

L

lam khrid mkhan ལམ་ཁྲིད་མཁན།

Lèshān 乐山

lha sde ལྷ་ས།

Línbōsì 林波寺

lo tswa ba ལོ་ཅ་བ།

M

Ma yus མ་ཡུས།

Mínjiāng 岷江

mchod rten མཆོད་རྟེན།

Mùmín xīncūn 牧民新村

N

Nóngjiālè 农家乐

Q

Qīnghǎi 青海

Qīngyījiāng 青衣江

R

Rin spungs dgon pa རིན་སྤངས་དགོན་པ།

Rdo rje རྩེ།

RMB (*rénmín bì*) 人民币

Rnga ba ར་བ།

Ruòěrgài 若尔盖

S

Shānbāsì 山巴寺

Shānbā 山巴

Shěnlóngkǎ 舍隆卡

Sìchuān 四川

Sìgūniáng 四姑娘

Sìyuàn guǎnlǐ wěiyuánhui 寺院管理委员会

Sku lha སྐུ་ལྷ།

Sku 'bum སྐུ་འབུམ།

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Sku 'bum byams pa gling སྐུ་འབུམ་བྱམས་པ་གླིང་།
Sku 'bum mthong grol mchod rten chen mo

སྐུ་འབུམ་མཚོང་གོལ་མཚོད་རྟེན་ཆེན་མོ།
Sgrol ma mchod rten སྐྱོལ་མ་མཚོད་རྟེན།

Sna sten dgon pa སྣ་སྡེན་དགོན་པ།

Sna zhig dgon pa སྣ་ཞིག་དགོན་པ།

Sōngpān 松潘

Sōngpānxiàn mínzōngjū 松潘县民宗局

Spyang gtsang dgon pa སྤྱང་གཙང་དགོན་པ།

T

thang ka ཐང་ཀ།

Tsang lha ཐང་ལྷ།

Tsong kha pa ཐང་ཀ་པ།

Tǔzú 土族

W

Wénguǎnhuì 文管会

Xiānggélīlā 香格里拉

X

Xīníng 西宁

Xīnjīn 新津

Z

Zàngjiālè 藏家乐

Zhānglà 障腊

Zung chu rdzong ཟུང་ཅུ་རྫོང་།

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